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Marcus Antonius' Campaign against the Pirates in 102 BC

The struggle between the Roman State and Mediterranean pirates is a problem in ancient history that has not been sufficiently studied. By analyzing events from the turn of the 1st century BC, the author provides information about the first serious military campaign, as well as the qualitative and quantitative Roman staff directed against the piracy in Cilicia. The author concludes that the problem of piracy was not solved and claims that Cilicia was established not as a province but as a military command aimed to resolve the situation in the Mediterranean Sea.

Keywords: Mediterranean Sea, Cilicia, ancient piracy, *lex de piratis*, Marcus Antonius, provincial system

At the end of the 2nd century BC numerous pirates began to damage the interests of both Rome and his allies in the Mediterranean.¹ The reason for this turn of events, as it is known, was the collapse of the political system of the Mediterranean after the defeat of the strongest states in the region by Rome – Carthage, Macedonia and the Kingdom of Seleucids – as well as the fall of the sea power of Rhodes² and the Ptolemaic power.³

The presence of pirates complicated trade communications significantly, by plundering trade caravans from Greece and Asia, hindering grain import from Africa, Egypt, Sardinia and Sicily, and capturing fa-

¹ ХЛЕВОВ [Hlevov] (2005: 323); МИШУЛИН [Mishulin] (1950: 116); SEMPLE (1916: 150–151); ЗЕЛИНСКИЙ [Zelinskij] (2002: 330).

² According to Strabo (14, 6, 9), Rhodes did not struggle with piracy for political reasons. But this statement should be considered more carefully (ORMEROD [1978: 203]; WIEMER [2002: 128–129]).

³ БОКЩАНИН [Bokschanin] (1966: 22); МОММЗЕН [Mommzen] (1937: 130); ORMEROD (1978: 199); WIEMER (2002: 237).

mous noblemen. Moreover, due to the absence of control in the maritime space it could be extremely difficult for any state to organize potentially an effective military offensive or to repel the enemy.

The situation was highly complicated by the fact that the antipiracy actions did not have a clear and distinct purpose. The new enemies of Rome were neither Carthage nor the Kingdom of Mithridates. Scattered on the seas and coasts, the piratical bases, as well as their fleets, were so elusive in their nature that it was extremely difficult to hunt them. The number of their ships by that time had exceeded six hundred. As Appian wrote, “the war with them was not ordinary, had nothing natural, nothing solid or clear; it caused a feeling of helplessness and fear” (App. *Mith.* 95). Besides, the Roman government participated in the fight against pirates only partially, without giving any unity to their actions.

Cilicia became the main base of sea robbers (Plut. *Pomp.* 24)⁴ because of its natural assets — nature conditions, according to Strabo, contributed in every way to the development of land and sea looting (Str. 14, 5, 6).

First evidence of the clash between Rome and the pirates in the Eastern Mediterranean region dates according to the sources to 102 BC. A significant fleet, consisting mostly of the ships of Rome-ruled cities and under the authority of the praetor Marcus Antonius invested with proconsular authority, was sent to Cilicia (Liv. *Per.* 68).⁵ Most likely, his powers were granted not by a special law, but by the usual procedure in the Senate.⁶ He was granted proconsular authority for 101 and 100 BC (Cic. *De Or.* 1, 82). However, there is no information on whether his powers traditionally applied to a specific limited space, or whether Marcus Antonius' imperium correlated with the authority of any nearby province governor.⁷

According to A. Sherwin-White, it is unlikely that the fleet was sent from Italy: it consisted of ships that were provided by such maritime

⁴ МИШУЛИН [Mishulin] (1950: 117); МОММЗЕН [Mommzen] (1937: 130).

⁵ АБРАМЗОН [Abramzon] (2005: 46); MAGIE (1950: 283); МОММЗЕН [Mommzen] (1937: 130); ORMEROD (1978: 208); ORMEROD (1922: 35); SHERWIN-WHITE (1976: 4); STUART JONES (1926: 167).

⁶ CARY (1924: 163).

⁷ EHRENBURG (1953: 116–117); SHERWIN-WHITE (1977: 69).

states as Rhodes and Byzantium. Marcus Antonius, who was commissioned to recruit sailors, organize a fleet and fight against pirates of the Cilician coasts, did this through the involvement of local forces in Asia Minor.⁸

The dominating point of view in historiography is that Antonius commanded a fleet sent against the pirates in Pamphylia and did not undertake operations on land (Liv. *Per.* 68). Pompeius Trogus also reports about naval warfare (*Prol.* 39),⁹ but Cicero mentions that Antonius was detained in Athens during his trip to Cilicia as a proconsul (Cic. *De Or.* 1, 82) and his praetorian officer Gratidianus was killed in Cilicia (Cic. *Brut.* 45, 168).¹⁰ In an inscription from Rhodes we find a mention of the name of Aulus Gabinius, the questor of M. Antonius and praetor of Cilicia. This suggests that Antonius operated against Cilicia both at sea and on land. Unfortunately, there is no information on the quantitative and qualitative composition of foot soldiers. The Roman fleet captured several ships and destroyed certain parts of the pirate bases;¹¹ the commander was named Creticus and celebrated a triumph.¹²

The creation of the province of Cilicia can be attributed to the result of Marcus Antonius' campaign. The province of Cilicia was established as a special military command in order to act against pirates whose nest was in that region. For almost 40 years (until Pompey the Great) certain areas of Cilicia did not correspond to the traditional idea/concept of a Roman province.¹³ The territorial boundaries of the province were not strictly defined: according to the description of Strabo (14, 5, 1), Cilicia, lying on both sides of the Taurus, was divided into two parts: the Trachea ("rocky", "rough") and the Pedia ("plains", "fruitful"). However, this information does not allow us to establish the exact boundaries between the lands of the Cilicians and their northern neighbours.¹⁴

⁸ АБРАМЗОН [Abramzon] (2005: 47–48); SHERWIN-WHITE (1976: 4).

⁹ Cit. ex. АБРАМЗОН [Abramzon] (2005: 47).

¹⁰ АБРАМЗОН [Abramzon] (2000: 295); SHERWIN-WHITE (1976: 8).

¹¹ МОММЗЕН [Mommzen] (1937: 130).

¹² MAGIE (1950: 283); ORMEROD (1978: 209).

¹³ АБРАМЗОН [Abramzon] (2005: 7); ЕГЕР [Eger] (1999: 555–556).

¹⁴ DOWNEY (1951: 151); MAGIE (1950: 266); ORMEROD (1978: 209); ORMEROD (1922: 35); SHERWIN-WHITE (1977: 70); SHERWIN-WHITE (1976: 5).

Most likely, Cilicia itself was not a part of this territory, since it nominally belonged to the Seleucid state.¹⁵ Apparently at that time, the province of Cilicia was considered as a base for diplomatic or military activities according to actual circumstances of the time, in this case to solve the pirate problem.

The increased power of the sea robbers is also evidenced by the fact that the Roman government adopted a relevant document regulating actions to resolve the situation at sea and this document reached us in two epigraphic versions (SEG 28-492).¹⁶ For a long time, it was believed that the inscriptions complement each other, but according to the present scholarly point of view, they are full-fledged independent translations of the decree.¹⁷ Based on the analysis of these sources, it is considered that the law was adopted no later than 100 BC, but before 99 BC.¹⁸

The Delphic inscription with the Greek translation of the decree of the Roman Senate (so-called *lex de piratis*), which is a part of the Emilius Paulus monument, is traditionally dated to 100 or 99 BC.¹⁹ The Senate addressed all cities and kings in alliance with the Roman people (συμμαχία καὶ φιλία ἐστὶν τῶι δήμῳι τῶι Ῥωμαίων Ἐπαρχος) and the viceroys of Asia and Macedonia with the request to render assistance to the Romans in the fight against pirates who prevented the navigation of Roman and Italian merchants. In addition, the consuls were instructed to transmit this message to the ambassadors of Rhodes, who were at that time in Rome, and to hold an audience for them on behalf of the Senate ἐκτός τῆς συντάξεως, that is, in an emergency (SEG 28-492).²⁰

However, this inscription gives no hint as to whether agreements were reached with local governors concerning their own powers with

¹⁵ SHERWIN-WHITE (1976: 8).

¹⁶ HASSALL-CRAWFORD-REYNOLDS (1974: 198, 207); STUART JONES (1926: 157, 161); SUMNER (2004: 211).

¹⁷ SUMNER (2004: 211).

¹⁸ SUMNER (2004: 215).

¹⁹ STUART JONES (1926: 157, 161); SUMNER (2004: 215).

²⁰ БОКЩАНИН [Bokschanin] (1966: 24); EHRENBERG (1953: 117); MAGIE (1950: 284); STUART JONES (1926: 158–159); SUMNER (2004: 216); For details about alliance with Rhodes: see WIEMER (2002: 325–328).

the commander sent by Rome to conduct anti-piracy campaigns (SEG 28-492).²¹

The inscription from Cnidos, which is an element of the bath of the Byzantine period, dates from the end of 101 or 100.²² According to the text, the consul in Rome was obliged to send letters to cities and kings who were in friendship with the Roman people (ἐν φιλίαςι δήμου Ῥωμαίων)²³ – as a priority, the city-states of the East and the rulers of Alexandria and Egypt, Syria, Cyrene and Cyprus (that is, those who controlled the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean) – with the demand to stop the activity of pirates on their territory. Kings and their officials should not allow pirates to sail from their lands and take them in the harbours of their countries. The rulers were also obliged to ensure the safety of sea navigation and trade for Roman citizens and Italic allies (SEG 28-492).²⁴

In this fragment it is added that through this law the Roman people declared Cilicia ἐπαρχεῖαν στρατηγικὴν (SEG 28-492).²⁵ In fact, it is not entirely clear how exactly to interpret this phrase. M. Hassall and his co-authors believe that Marcus Antonius annexed the region of Cilicia and organized a province there;²⁶ J. Sumner believes that the Romans created a new province through this law.²⁷ A. Sherwin-White, however, argues that it does not follow from the content of other fragments that this phrase certainly implies Cilicia's turning into a separate province. In his opinion, the Romans at that time did not create a province on the territory of Pamphylia and Pisidia, which received in documents the inap-

²¹ БОКЩАНИН [Bokschanin] (1966: 24); EHRENBERG (1953: 117); MAGIE (1950: 284); STUART JONES (1926: 158–159).

²² АБРАМЗОН [Abramzon] (2000: 295); HASSALL–CRAWFORD–REYNOLDS (1974: 198, 207); SHERWIN-WHITE (1977: 70).

²³ The same as in the previous source this statement is the form of latin *socii et nominis Latini*.

²⁴ HASSALL–CRAWFORD–REYNOLDS (1974: 216).

²⁵ HASSALL–CRAWFORD–REYNOLDS (1974: 213).

²⁶ HASSALL–CRAWFORD–REYNOLDS (1974: 209).

²⁷ "Rome has, by this very law, created a new pretorian *provincia*, Cilicia" – SUMNER (2004: 225).

propriate name of “Cilicia”.²⁸ In one of the inscriptions from Cnidus, for example, Likaonia, which is a part of the province of Asia, is also called “province”.²⁹

Meanwhile, in reality during this period in the East there were only two ordinary Roman provinces – Macedonia and Asia, which were governed by the proconsuls. Most likely, the text of the law is precise: the governors of the province of Asia received instructions about operations against Cilicia, a mountainous coast on which there were fortifications of pirates. There was no need to create a second province on the territory of Roman Asia.

Praetor could successfully accomplish the task of suppressing pirates, relying on the resources of Asia – the local fleet, material sources and the naval base of Pamphylia, which was not part of the possessions bequeathed to Rome by Attalus, hence, it is likely that Antonius’ operations were not intended to change the balance of power in Anatolia.³⁰

Thus, it is not at all necessary to think that Cilicia was then proclaimed a province. Apparently, it means that a military command was created in Cilicia, aimed at settling the situation on the Mediterranean Sea.

This law shows that the Roman government was not indifferent to the pirate issue, and also that at that time pirates were indeed a serious problem that needed to be solved (Str. 14, 5, 1).³¹ However, they were not yet quite a dangerous phenomenon, since the issue was resolved at the level of local naval forces (that is, with the help of all independent states), and not directly by the intervention of the army of the Roman Republic.

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²⁸ SHERWIN-WHITE (1976: 6).

²⁹ HASSALL–CRAWFORD–REYNOLDS (1974: 202).

³⁰ HASSALL–CRAWFORD–REYNOLDS (1974: 6); Th. Mommsen states that establishment of the Cilicia province should relate to 102 BC – MOMMSEN [Mommzen] (1937: 130).

³¹ АБРАМЗОН [Abramzon] (2000: 293).

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